

**State of the County Address
February 17, 2006**

**Marc Boldt
Chair, Board of Clark County Commissioners**

Thank you, John, and thank you to the Chamber of Commerce for hosting today's event in this beautiful new facility. Welcome everyone to the 20th State of the County luncheon.

After my first full year as a county commissioner, it is my pleasure and my honor to talk to you about the state of the county. I am proud to be able to do that, because I am proud of county government; proud of our staff, our accomplishments, and the direction we are heading; and proud of you, our citizens.

This is a long speech for a farm boy like me to give. In the legislature, there are times where you could speak for only 3 minutes or you would be gavelled down by the Speaker. In 10 years, I was gavelled down just once—and then everyone questioned the Speaker's watch.

Clearly, this will be a longer speech. It needs to be. I want you to leave knowing a little of what we've done this year and a little of what we intend to do in the year ahead. Most of all, I hope you will leave with a good understanding of *why* we will do it and *how* we will do it.

In the Super Bowl, we all know how the Seahawks got there and we all know what they wanted as an outcome. But we all watched how they played the game. The Hawks are working to win the next Super Bowl. They know that now they must work on how they will get there. And I hope the NFL will get refs that are awake the entire game.

I hope that when you leave today, it will be with an understanding that the state of the county does not rely on our budget, on our economic development plan, on our growth plan, or even on annexation. Rather, it is dependent on you, on me—on all of us, as individuals and as a community.

Because the state of the county depends on the strength of its people.

I'd like to first talk about our community's elected officials, and I'll begin right here with this board of county commissioners. Last year we were something of a question mark. This year we are less so.

We have had a year to work together and enhance our perspective. We are in a position to provide strong leadership, and I believe that is what we are doing.

Our goal is to have the best run county not only in the state but in the nation. The Seahawks can make it to the top, and so can we. Great companies such as Nautilus, Sharp, or Georgia Pacific did not become that way because they have loyal customers. It is because they have great management, and that is our goal.

We are the first board in some time where all three commissioners have lots of experience in Olympia. So because of that, our approach is different. The way we look at things and the way we relate to each other is different.

We are very hands-on in the sense that we take responsibility for some of the day-to-day activities of county government. The big picture has always been the responsibility of the commissioners, but we are also active and involved in many of the details, probably more than previous boards. One of the unique features of our leadership is our wandering around, or as Lewis and Clark put it, “management by walking around.” We know this approach makes us more accountable, too.

We were very involved in resolving the lease issues for the Lewis and Clark Railroad. To tell you the truth, sometimes I didn’t know if we were commissioners or family counselors. Regardless, we hold ourselves accountable for the success or failure of that agreement.

On the methadone clinic, where feelings have been so intense, we took responsibility for dealing with the state and the clinic provider to ensure that they listened to our community before the clinic opened. We are accountable for those actions.

You will soon see wetlands and habitat ordinances moving forward for review and adoption. We have been working closely with staff on these ordinances. They will not surprise us.

I have found out that when you are out front on an issue, you always unite people very soon. At first they will usually be against you, but they are united. If you take your time, believe in staff, and have faith in citizens, you will, however, succeed. We’re crossing our fingers on these two. We will be accountable if they meet with public approval – and we will be accountable if they don’t.

We intend to take our level of accountability one step further. This year we will have policy staff for transportation and the environment become part of our office and report directly to us. It reinforces our responsibility for 100 percent of the policy-making. It sounds simple, but it’s a huge step.

It is a changing culture in our county government. There is no question whatsoever that it calls for a strong work force dedicated to public service, because service to residents drives most of our decisions. The county staff that were honored earlier today reflect our interest in quality and problem-solving and thinking outside the box.

Staff are the key to any business, but in government, where you are a captive customer, it is even more important. This board will continue to take an interest in hiring and keeping staff who have an attitude of service to our citizens. As Southwest Airlines says, hire for attitude, train for skills.

We know that at other levels of government in this community, there are strong elected officials who provide leadership and who also hold themselves accountable. Each city in our county is led by incredibly committed men and women making hard decisions at night while also working during the day.

I want to acknowledge right up front that despite differences that arise among us, this board has the greatest respect for the council men and women who lead their cities. When we talk about the state of the county being strong, we are including them. Thank you.

I am certain that every mayor and council-person would join me in saying that this community cannot move forward without strong citizens and community partners—volunteers, neighborhood leaders, residents who serve on councils, commissions, and committees. We will need to draw on those strengths to solve problems and confront challenges in ways that make sense for us—Clark County people, solving Clark County problems.

Within the last year, I have become more convinced of that than ever. The situation that brought it home was Hurricane Katrina. None of us could have imagined the devastation that event caused to the people of the Gulf Coast.

One thing counties learned from this experience—at least Clark County has learned it—is that we cannot look to the state and federal governments to fix our problems.

We believe that Clark County's future is that we'll handle challenges that come our way from within ourselves. We are not going to cry at the government in Olympia or the government in Washington, D.C., for making regulations or not giving us money. We will deal with it.

The writing is on the wall. With a war that is ongoing, and with hurricanes and earthquakes, the federal government is going to dry up. So the sooner that we in Clark County can deal with our own problems, the better off we'll be.

We need to be self-sufficient, and we need for county problems to have county solutions.

That's already happening.

Look at the new Center for Community Health that opened just last month. For people needing public health services or social services, and for their families, it means having easy access to resources and being treated with respect.

In the past, veterans, low-income residents, people with little or no health insurance, and people facing a variety of physical and mental health issues would be bounced around from one location to another to receive the services they needed. For many of these people, that could be difficult and could hinder their progress.

At the new facility, John Doe who needs drug treatment will be able to get that treatment immediately. If he has mental health problems, he can get counseling and treatment in the same building. He can get medical tests or vocational counseling, too, if he needs them.

Mothers can get health services for their children—for instance, shots and check-ups and clinics on parenting skills. And if they need it, they can also get help finding housing or connecting to educational opportunities. All in the same building.

With our new facility, veterans will receive the care they need, in their own community.

In treating drug addiction more effectively, which I believe will happen, we will reduce crime and will save taxpayer dollars. I also believe it will improve the quality of life for all of our citizens when addicts become fully functioning individuals.

Social services will continue to need more of our attention. It is an area where we are determined to become more self-sufficient and to solve our own problems. That will involve individual citizens as well as your government.

Here's an example: It's probably not news to you that when people on meth go into drug treatment, it's hard work for them to stay clean. Let's say Jane Doe goes into treatment and is determined to put her life back on track. What about calling Jane every morning to ask her how she's doing and to give her some words of encouragement? It doesn't cost a dime.

A recent article in The Columbian described steps the First United Methodist Church in downtown Vancouver is taking to support people struggling with meth addiction. The congregation has learned that treatment works, and that finding people who care about them can be a crucial part of a person's recovery. Church members are stepping forward to help fill that role.

We'll be looking more closely at faith-based resources—and other resources that aren't funded by tax dollars--and seeing how they can work more effectively with us. So far, there have been a small number of churches that have done the majority of the work for the homeless or providing food. I believe the rest of the faith-based community would like to get involved but may not know what to do. It is our job to help them, and we plan to address that in the coming year. If federal funding stays flat—and recent decisions out of D.C. show that's likely—then it is all the more important that we rally our local resources.

We need to be clear which services Clark County will provide and pay for. If state or federal funds for other services are not available, those services may not happen.

I'd like to say this as directly as possible, and it's a message that is aimed at the state legislature: If you are going to give us a mandate and you want us to implement that mandate, then please fund that mandate. If you do not fund it, we will not implement it. As I said before, we will not whine or cry about it, but don't expect us to make it happen, either.

In saying that—and I mean it firmly--I have been around long enough to know that state and federal dollars will always play a role in the level of service we are able to provide. The reality is that when we talk about being self-sufficient, it is a matter of degree. But that doesn't mean we can't think about doing things in new ways and making the most of whatever resources are available to us.

We intend to apply that mind-set to transportation. Currently either the county pays for a road as we build it, or the developer pays for it as he develops. Or if there is a need for a big intersection, we wait for the unlucky developer who comes along at the tipping point and has to pay for it all. Or as in Salmon Creek, we may have to impose a moratorium.

Bonding for roads will be a major conversation for the board this year. First of all, it affects bonding capacity for the county. But it also may be a way for us to get ahead of the game if we can bond for roads ourselves and then, as development occurs, we can collect from that development. It would be a major change in how we do business.

We will continue our strong support of a public transit system. We want it to be the very best. As members of the C-Tran board, Commissioners Morris, Stuart, and I will work to ensure that the system is efficient and cost-effective, and that it provides for the needs of residents in all of our cities. It must pay special attention to riders with disabilities and special needs who may be more dependent than others on our bus system.

One of the most important transportation questions facing our region is the Columbia River Crossing. This Board of County Commissioners believes that we need to build a third bridge across the Columbia River first instead of spending billions to rebuild the existing I-5 bridge. Interim improvements can be made to the current bridge to reduce congestion and increase freight mobility in the I-5 corridor. But over the long term, the best use of transportation dollars would be to divert freight and passenger traffic with destinations outside the I-5 corridor to another route, away from downtown Vancouver and the Portland area.

We will also need to think about doing things in new ways when it comes to difficult social issues. It's not easy to talk about the problems of meth use and sex offenders. Most of us would rather deal with tangible things, like jobs or roads. But meth use and sex offenders are equally real, and we can't pretend they'll go away on their own.

Last year Commissioner Morris told you that addressing the meth problem would be a priority. The working group we put together will be coming forward very soon with final recommendations. They will require hard work, education, even more coordination among law enforcement, and much time and money for treatment.

Regardless of where the funds come from, we will have to do the work at the local level. County solutions for county problems. And it *is* a problem for all of us. At a minimum, we pay for it in more costly health insurance just as we pay higher homeowner's insurance because of burglaries.

The problem of sex offenders and child abuse is a deadly bacteria that infects our neighborhoods—and it is out of control. We may be able to get legislative help from the state, but at its core, we will have to solve this problem ourselves, locally.

The Sheriff has talked to us about the need for us to be more aggressive in registering sex offenders and monitoring them. Currently, there are not enough staff to do this effectively, and we intend to support efforts to beef up in this area through additional funding. .

We cannot talk about a strong Clark County without also talking about the strength of our finances. Make no mistake: At this moment, Clark County is fiscally strong.

The county maintains a “Double A” bond rating, low debt, and prudent reserves. Our county has a long history of frugality and fiscal responsibility that has made it the envy of many other counties around the state. I say this from my experience in the state legislature where I learned time and time again that in almost any comparison, Clark County works. We have been good stewards for you.

But ultimately we may find that just keeping our financial house in order is not good enough. Here is why: While rapid growth and the new construction that it brings keep us adequately funded today, this revenue source will not be able to keep up with costs.

As we continue to model the future of county finances, one simple fact emerges: Over the long haul, revenues for most county services will grow at about 4 percent per year; but underlying costs to keep these services at the same level will grow at 6 percent per year. This sounds like a small difference, but over time it will eat away at county services.

In fact, this is a statewide issue that has to be resolved at the state level. The urgency of this problem varies from one jurisdiction to the next. Some counties are virtually bankrupt today. Fortunately for Clark County, because we are fiscally sound right now, we can take steps to get ahead of the curve—at least for a while--in case effective state solutions don't emerge. We will be looking at our budgets and our budgeting process with an eye to less reliance on others and more self-sufficiency.

But I would like to be as direct as possible that we may still need to find additional local dollars to address many of the problems that are confronting this community. That's just a reality.

Certainly we will continue to look for no-cost and low-cost solutions. But we'd be kidding ourselves, and kidding you, if we thought that alone would do the job.

County commissioners have the authority to impose an additional two-tenths of one percent sales tax within unincorporated Clark County.

The commissioners have had the authority to do this for years. While cities all around us have increased the tax, Clark County has avoided taking that step.

However, we are committed to becoming more self-sufficient. Additional revenue from this small bump in the tax would help. I want to be clear that we are seriously considering it.

Maintaining the financial strength of the county is in fact a key consideration in the issue of annexation. As annexations occur—and they will—one of the top priorities from the county's perspective is to make sure the county remains able to serve everyone through a financially stable budget.

Any annexation affects all Clark County residents. It has an impact on some of the revenues that the county receives, and this affects the regional services that the county can afford to provide—for instance, public safety, public health, and social services. So as cities acquire land and residents leave the unincorporated area, it is our goal that the cities and county all be financially whole.- It is not only a goal but a true obligation. Clark County must remain financially strong to retain a businesslike approach to the regional services we are expected—and required—to provide.

Commissioner Morris, Commissioner Stuart, and I, are the elected officials in Clark County who have a responsibility to all of the people within the county's borders.- We serve all of you.- Because of that, we firmly believe we have a duty to make sure all annexations benefit the entire community.

Each of the county's cities has its own vision for the future. As our county changes, so does each city, both in population and in geographic size. The Board of Commissioners recognizes this. It's to be expected, and we endorse the idea that cities need to be able to achieve their goals.

We want to work cooperatively with all of our cities when it comes to annexations. We want to benefit from what we've learned in past efforts. This includes lessons that were both positive and negative. For future annexations, we want to continue to do better.

It's not about stopping annexations. It's about doing them right. We are all in this together, and we will come out of these discussions an even stronger community.

Everybody gains when we do annexations right. One result of quality annexations is that the county and our cities together will be an economic dynamo. We will be on a path that takes our county from good to great.

When it comes to economic development, it isn't the tax breaks that bring long-staying companies to an area. It is attitude and consistency. People want to know what the future holds. They want to know they are welcome today, and even more important, that they will be welcome tomorrow, more for the jobs that they provide than for the taxes that they pay.

One of the priorities of this board is to make sure that any changes in our code are realistic and can be clearly understood by all – all meaning even those without a law degree. Our county staff are working hard to make this happen as part of good customer service, so that the county is not an obstacle for businesses that wish to locate or expand here.

We want to lead in what we can be best at and leave the rest to others.

We want to refine our regulation processes so that issues can be resolved in a straightforward way. We can have thousands of acres available for companies and businesses, but if our regulation processes are not effective, that land will remain idle and the jobs will stay elsewhere.

We will be paying special attention to the Lewis and Clark Railroad and the zoning for this critical corridor. Currently it is zoned for light industry, which doesn't apply very well to what railroads do. Heavy industrial zoning would fit railroads better, but we know that wouldn't make neighbors happy. So our goal is to create a railroad-friendly zone that will accommodate the railroad and that is acceptable to neighbors as a way to safeguard and upgrade this community asset.

I want our county and our cities to be a threat to every other county and city in the nation when it comes to attracting and retaining business. I want us even to be competitive with our Oregon neighbors. I have always said I like both Oregon universities—that is, until they play the Cougs.

Before annexation took over the headlines, much of the newspaper ink about the county was devoted to our comprehensive growth management plan.

A lot of time and energy has been focused on our growth plan, with more to come. But today I want to make only a couple of points about our growth plan.

Growth Management does have goals that we should attain. In our plan we have called for a 2 percent population increase for 20 years. We want to plan for that population, even though from past history it will likely grow faster.

As we plan for this population, we also need to remember that Clark County is mandated by the state to have a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Our residents need a variety of housing options, including emergency, transition, and low-income housing.

President George W. Bush stated in his recent speech that his Dad's new best friend, Bill Clinton, recently turned 60. I realize we do not have to meet the needs of the former President's income, but thousands of other citizens have, or will, turn 60 in Clark County. They have different housing needs, transportation needs, and must have affordable housing to meet their income.

Our growth plan is more than drawing lines on a map. It is also addressing these sorts of issues. To bring this home, an official of a huge corporation told me they were forced to locate outside our county because their employees whose salaries were between \$30,000 and \$40,000 would not be able to afford good homes here.

If we want entry-level jobs that will prepare workers for high-paying jobs, we must make sure that we include housing that is affordable for workers earning low- and mid-level incomes—housing for all incomes and all ages.

As we complete this review process that is under way, we will ensure that environmentally sensitive lands are protected. We will do this while maintaining our economic strength, while striving to make sure that my children as well as yours can afford to buy a house here.

Although it's not written in an ordinance yet, we have said over and over again that sensitive land is sensitive land. It doesn't matter how many lawyers you have arguing otherwise, a wetland is still a wetland. If you want to farm or develop in a way that impacts that habitat, you must deal with that. But we'll make sure you know what land is buildable, and what land is not, up front. It will be clear.

We *will* protect our environment, and that's one important factor as we determine expanded urban growth boundaries. We need to include enough land for the population we are expecting. So if we are going to be firm about not encroaching on sensitive lands—we are putting them off limits for development-- we may need more land in total to accommodate future homes and businesses.

Our growth plan calls for a variety of housing types, so that people who want to have different lifestyle choices can all find them in Clark County. This includes areas where there will be small residential lots and multi-family housing—areas where kids may not have a lawn to play on.

Commissioner Morris has a major interest in parks and ballfields. We want to put them where they are needed—not just where land is available for purchase—and we will be looking especially at those areas where the kids might not have opportunities to run and play otherwise. We hope to join hands with the schools and coordinate with them in developing new parks and ballfields. Commissioner Stuart is a leader in this area.

Less than two months from now, April 6, marks the date 200 years ago that the Lewis and Clark Expedition left what is now Clark County on their way back to the east coast. This year, April 6 also marks the date when this board of commissioners will gather at William Clark Park to sign documents officially adopting our 2006 Clark County Trail and Bikeway Systems Plan, which is another Lewis and Clark legacy project.

I'd like to briefly draw on my Olympia experience again. In the legislature, we got used to arguing on the floor, arguing in committee, voicing our opinions, coming out of it and being friends. That's really what has helped the three of us commissioners this year. Commissioner Morris was key in making it work.

Teamwork and problem-solving are woven into the history of our area. We know that the Lewis and Clark expedition was demanding and dangerous. Many decisions were not easy. There was not always agreement, and journals show that there were times of crankiness and anger. William Clark and the rest of the Corps of Discovery had no choice but to rely on each other—to make decisions, get beyond the arguments, and move onward to deal with the next problem they encountered.

That brings me to you. As I said at the beginning, Clark County's real condition—the state of the county—is about people, and it depends on each of us. You are the ones who help us make the hard decisions and your contributions have much to do with whether our efforts succeed.

I'd like to close with a story about a contest at a fair in England. The contest was to guess the weight of an ox. More than 800 people entered the contest. The winner was from a select group of people who knew exactly what to look for. Although he was more than 50 pounds off, it was still a good guess.

But a professor took all the tickets of guesses and then averaged them out. The entire group was just 1 pound off.

What all of us know is that Clark County has many outstanding men and women who can achieve many things, but we must remember that collectively we can achieve greatness.

And next year we're going to win the Super Bowl!

Thank you and God bless.